NORTHWEST, OLD - DESCRIPTION
+ TRAVEL

Travelers' Experiences

in the Old Northwest

Harry E. Cole

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STAGECOACH AND TAVERN TALES OF THE OLD NORTHWEST
by H. E. Cole.
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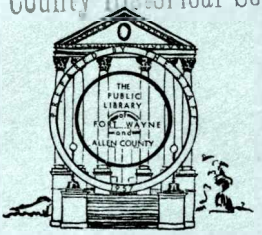

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FOREWORD

The contemporary traveler in the Midwest moves rapidly, safely, and comfortably, whether he travels by air, rail, or road. During the first half of the nineteenth century, however, the journeyer experienced frequent delays, discomforts and perils from weather and desperadoes.

The following publication, relating tales of those bygone days, originally appeared as a chapter of STAGECOACH AND TAVERN TALES OF THE OLD NORTHWEST by H. E. Cole. The volume was published by the Arthur H. Clark Company in 1930. The publisher has graciously granted permission to reprint.

The Boards and the Staff of the Public Library of Fort Wayne and Allen County present this account in the hope that it will prove interesting and informative to Library patrons.

The first travelers from the east to visit the great Northwest returned with marvelous tales of its surpassing beauty, of the regions of extensive forests, valuable water-power sites, and rich prairie land, all awaiting the coming of the settler. Throughout New York and New England especially were these reports absorbed with deep interest, and it was the aspiration of thousands, particularly of the younger generation, to migrate into the land of promise. They set forth with light hearts and came freighted with many hopes. They found but a slight veneer of civilization, naught but pristine conditions.

As these men and women from the east moved slowly along in stagecoaches or covered wagons, indian wigwams met their view in almost every direction, and inquisitive savages crept around that they might scrutinize the new arrivals and their baggage. The landscape, however, was one of infinite freshness and beauty; beautiful indeed was the panorama which greeted their vision. In summer the land was covered with a luxuriant growth of vegetation, the greater part new and strange to the newcomers. There were wild flowers of nearly every shade and color that fancy could paint or imagination conceive, and the tall prairie grass waved in luxuriance in the gentle breezes of balmy afternoons. There were crystal lakes and streams, bubbling springs and rivulets, wild animals, flocks of birds – a new paradise for man's inheritance. It was a land from which Pandora might lift a lid.

Travelers, when they reached the Northwest after the long journey on the Great Lakes, supposed they were in the far west; but in one instance this was found not to be the case. When John S. Frary reached Milwaukee he was accosted by a stranger:

"Do you want to go west, young man?"

"West!" cried the weary, homesick traveler. "West! for eighteen long days and nights have I sought the west on the fastest conveyances the country affords, and if you have anything further *west*, commend me to the first boat going *east*." He changed his mind, however, and on a rocking stagecoach moved into the interior of Wisconsin locating at the village of Oregon in Dane county.

The younger generation can scarcely realize the extent of travel across Wisconsin in the fifties. By that time much of the land east and south of the Wisconsin river had been settled, and emigrants arriving at Milwaukee and other lake ports outfitted for undeveloped regions farther west. It is estimated that during the fall and summer of 1850 more than ten thousand persons with teams and stock crossed the river at Portage. Immigrants came through in large wagons, to which were hitched four, six, or eight oxen. Often cattle, hogs, and sheep were driven along. This innumerable stream of life flowed past many a tavern, the Steele Tavern at Newport, the Red Tavern near Mauston, and numberless others along the route.

Pictures which illustrate the manner of traveling in pioneer vehicles indicate that if one were not accurately balanced in the crude conveyance his nether extremities were scheduled for sore punishment. It was quite possible that a passenger might be churned about until he longed, upon alighting at his destination, for the serv-

ices of a masseur, had this functionary been in existence at the time. On a protracted journey the coach was liable to be dragged from one mudhole into another, over rough corduroy roads and through rocky stretches, up hill and down, until the patience of not only the driver and passengers, but of the horses as well, was near exhaustion.

The overturning of a stage was not as disastrous as a modern train wreck; nevertheless, it provided plenty of thrills. At the close of the Black Hawk war, the defeated chief and others of his tribesmen were taken by stage over the National road to Washington in order that they might recognize the futility of engaging in war with the whites. At Washington, in Pennsylvania, the horses ran away, thundered down a long steep hill and before they were brought under control the vehicle upset. Naturally, the indians were greatly excited; some were injured, and as a crowd gathered Black Hawk himself was the first to emerge from the wreck. The war chief gave vent to his feelings with intensity.

Not infrequently passengers placed their trust in Providence, especially when the ice across an impeditive river was weak, the current cold and swift. It is a miracle that so many escaped casualty, for drivers became careless of dangers which they encountered almost daily along the way. When the river was open a ferry was used in crossing, the rude floating device being attached to a cable in such a way that the current forced it along. Occasionally the ferryboat broke from the cable, landing the load perhaps far down the river. This occurrence resulted in vexing delay and necessitated much labor to bring the cumbersome vehicle back on the highway.

When the stage over the line extending between Bar-

aboo and Madison crossed the Wisconsin river at Merrimack on the ice, it was sometimes necessary to go on a gallop to keep from breaking through – a magnified "ticklish bender" of one's boyhood days. One wintry day Henry Cowles, the most famous driver on this line, did break through and his horses were extricated with the greatest difficulty. Timid passengers always walked across the ice and those more daring who ventured to retain their seats usually held themselves in readiness to leap to safety at any instant. Often it was necessary, when great cakes of ice came floating down, to use long poles to push the craft across, and during the fall when the Wisconsin was freezing over and when the ice was unsafe in the spring, the stage was driven to Prairie du Sac and the crossing made on a toll-bridge. Such an emergency left the village of Merrimack isolated.

Salmon E. Cowles was a driver in the fifties when his brother Henry owned the line and while driving four horses between Lodi and the present site of Waunakee, one of his wheel-animals deliberately lay down in the water and mud which filled the highway. The beast was stubborn. After much coaxing, threatening, and even punishing, it became evident that the coach with its load could not be pulled out. For passengers to step out meant to step into anything but a pleasant plight, the mud being well-nigh knee deep. For the ladies, especially, the situation was most embarrassing. At last a big, good-natured individual in the vehicle volunteered to relieve the predicament by carrying the passengers to dry land. One by one he removed the women and children, then with much maneuvering the teams were able to draw the coach upon firm ground.

When a stagecoach broke down, passengers were

compelled to sit in the cold and rain, if weather were inclement, until repairs could be effected. When a vehicle mired in a swamp or the load was too great for the teams negotiating hills, all hands must alight and help get the vehicle out of trouble.

When highways became snowy aisles through forest and farmland, and the sun looked down through flawless blue upon a world of glistening white, coaches were placed upon runners and the horses adorned with jingling bells. Passengers then rode through a landscape of immaculate loveliness free from dust and mud, their only inconvenience an occasional obstructive snowdrift. Great buffalo robes and a contrivance known as a footstove protected travelers measurably from wind and cold. The latter device was made of wood and metal combined in such manner that when live coals were placed within the stove it would radiate heat for a considerable time.

The baggage of the period was quite as unique as the mode of travel. There were queer carpetbags, strange trunks, curious boxes from foreign lands, and other nondescript pieces. Then, too, fair ones brought aboard the coach bandboxes of various kinds, some more or less attractive. In the feminine contraptions were the personal possessions of the owner, not only head-gear of various styles created through the passing years, but calashes, muskmelon hoods, and poke bonnets sufficiently large to hide pretty faces. In these pasteboard containers were likewise wigs, muffs, caps, and other wearing apparel necessary and unnecessary in the middle of the nineteenth century, the boxes filling the mission of the suitcase and wardrobe trunk of today. Boxes were of various hues and frequently elaborately decorated

with pictures of Faneuil Hall, the old Philadelphia Capitol, or the Erie canal, contributing not a little to the picturesqueness of the outfit.

Early stages not only carried passengers, but express and freight. In the thirties a driver left Chicago having aboard a savage-looking wolf urgently wanted in Racine. Nimrods at that place had decided upon a hunting contest with Norman Clark as leader on one side and Marshall M. Strong on the other. These two individuals had "chosen up" and it was agreed that all kinds of game could be counted; a squirrel to equal a certain number of points, a rabbit another number, muskrat additional points. Deer were to count three hundred, a live wolf one thousand. It was further agreed that scalps of these creatures might be secured by fair means or foul, the heads of the animals to be in evidence on the designated day of reckoning. Clark and his companions heard of a deer hunter on Pleasant Prairie who had a generous collection of heads which were much desired. Without obtaining permission to use the animal, a horse belonging to Schuyler Mattison, a stranger in the town, was appropriated and driven hastily through the drifts to secure the collection by purchase. In the meantime the Strong contingent heard of a live wolf in Chicago and ordered it shipped by stage forthwith. When the stage reached the Willis Tavern, Captain Smith and a party of rollicking soldiers came out from Southport (Kenosha) and the captain ended the career of the wolf by striking it on the head with a bottle of gin. While this drama was being enacted Strong learned of a trapper at Milwaukee who had enough muskrats heads to fill a sleigh. When these were secured they out-counted everything in sight. The hunt was at an end and everybody was

...the captain ended the career of the wolf...

mad. Clark had ruined the Mattison horse and had to pay damages amounting to seventy-five dollars. Strong sued Captain Smith for killing the wolf with a bottle of gin. It was the first court action in Racine county, and the verdict was for six cents damages with costs. Stage drivers and taverners were important witnesses, the affair was one of much local celebrity.

During the middle of the nineteenth century the pendulum of life swung in wide arcs; slavery or no slavery was the paramount question. Freesoilers, Democrats, and Republicans contended at the ballot box. The Kansas-Nebraska bill, border warfare, the fugitive slave law, John Brown, and other topics were daily discussed. A storm was impending, hot human volcanoes were in eruption, and souls were set on fire by verbal friction. With an atmosphere thus surcharged, it was not surprising that passengers often found themselves in a turmoil as the old stage swayed and bumped along the road.

Among the passengers when stage lines were first opened were lawyers, doctors, preachers, newspapermen, lumbermen, traders, and settlers seeking to place their feet on the ladder of fame or gain a place of abode in the new country. In the fifties and sixties numerous raftsmen floated down the Wisconsin river to some snubbing post on the bank and resorted to stages for their return. During the Civil war soldiers were frequently passengers from railway stations to homes in the interior, bringing many thrilling tales of the sanguinary conflict. The fall of Vicksburg inspired citizens of Dodgeville to indulge in a brilliant celebration. The news reached the village from Mineral Point about midnight, the messengers riding their horses at a gallop and shouting the glad tidings. Soon the entire community was astir. Bonfires were built at street intersections

... a crowd of miners gathered, and... a duel followed

and men toted combustible material from every quarter of the village. The band played, the crowd marched, and John Sagers served liquid refreshments with utter indifference to cost. The fanfare embraced the whole populace; it was a unique and grandiose celebration. In the midst of all the excitement the stage arrived bringing home William George, a soldier on furlough. Old friends gathered about and as he beheld the town ablaze his astonishment was complete. Thinking all the jubilation and illumination was in his honor he threw up his hands, exclaiming: "Great Heavens! how did you know that I was a-coming?"

Not infrequently there were aboard coaches individuals who were suspected of being horse thieves. They seldom had their eyes on the stage property, however, for there were more spirited beasts to be had in an open pasture or unlocked stall. Then there were peddlers with their packs, and speculators in prosperous dress. During the frenzied hop period, pickers arriving at stations were conveyed to the hop-yards, and of hop-pole pullers there were not a few.

Criminals and others making a hurried departure sometimes resorted to stagecoaches. In the early days of LaFayette county there was a dispute between two men respecting rights to a piece of mineral land. Both became angry, a crowd of miners gathered, and a duel followed. One contestant for the land drew an old pepper-box revolver and proceeded to fire upon his enemy. The other replied by seizing a rock and hurling it dangerously near his foe. By this time he of the weapon was ready to fire again only to find another boulder thrown defiantly at him. Back and forth, first pistol, then rock, the fray continued until the last ball had been fired when the holder threw down the gun and fled in

the full belief that he had riddled his enemy with bullets. Rushing to the nearest village he mounted a horse that he found hitched to a post, saddled and bridled. Without leave of the owner he rode the animal with all speed a distance of ten miles to the barn of Frink and Walker on the stage route between Galena and Chicago, where he left the panting steed by the side of the highway and took hasty passage for the east. According to an early account of the affair the fellow did not cease his flight until he reached Rome, New York. As a result of the collision the man of the rocks, after making a thorough examination of himself, found there was a hole through the rim of his hat. Besides the perforation he secured the pistol as a souvenir of the affair with full possession of the "diggins" for future operations, and cheers from the approving crowd.

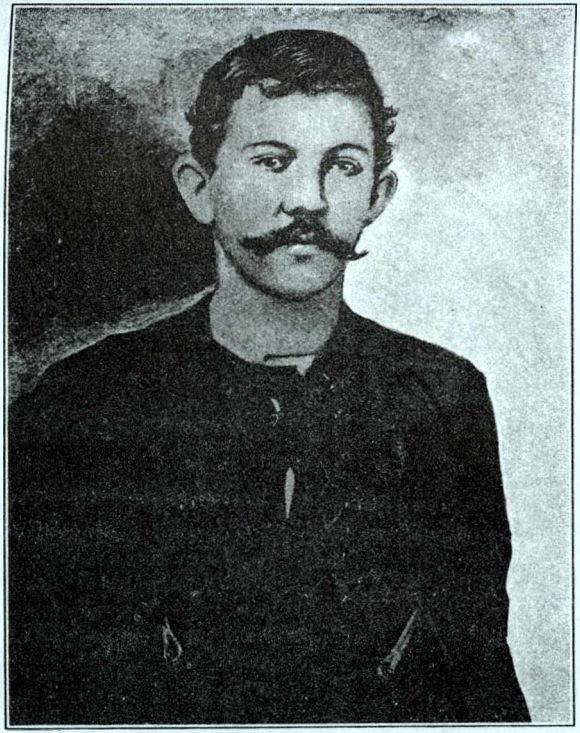
When officers were on the trail of a criminal, coaches sometimes made unusual speed. The distance from Madison to Baraboo is thirty-five miles by way of Lodi and Merrimack, and Salmon E. Cowles once drove it in six hours, the usual schedule being eight. A sheriff was aboard from Janesville and offered the driver ten dollars provided he reduce the time two hours. The stage reached its destination within the desired limit, the extra bonus was paid, and the criminal was apprehended.

Before the advent of the railroad in England, so many coaches were attacked by highwaymen that passengers frequently made their wills and said their prayers before setting out upon a journey. Britons insisted on carrying gold when traveling and this practice encouraged bold men to commit crime. In the western part of the United States gold carried as express on stagecoaches and by passengers was an invitation for

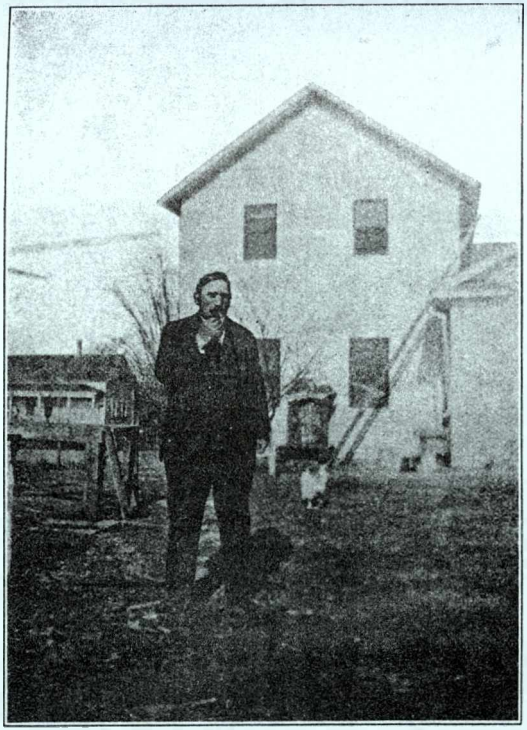
the Jesse James style of bandit to gallop up, firing shots in the air as a warning to all to yield to his demands. In that section of the country, with its mountains and swiftly running streams, if passengers escaped with their lives from the great variety of natural dangers, there always was a chance of highwaymen stripping them of their money and leaving them injured or dying. Seldom were coaches disturbed in New England or in the Great Lakes region, as drafts and bills of exchange were largely used instead of cash.

When Moore and Davis operated a stage line between Galena and Mazomanie, then a railway station, a driver was discharged as the vehicle was near the Ruggles farm. Upon leaving he stole the mail pouch from the boot of the coach and this never was recovered. Years after silver coins were plowed up in a field some distance from the scene of the robbery and it is surmised that, in searching through the letters before burying the contents of the sack, the thief missed the coins. When these were brought to light the story of the theft was revived.

Raymond Holzse (pronounced Holsay and spelled variously) was a real bandit. He practiced shooting by mounting a horse and riding swiftly around a tree firing at a bull's eye. Sometimes he varied his program by tossing up hazel-nuts and cracking them with revolver shots. In the spring of 1890 a stage was held up between Pulcifer and Bonduel, the losses being small. The crime was thought to be the work of Holzse. About ten o'clock the morning of May 8, of the same year, as Herman Rafoth was driving a coach from the north toward Shawano, he heard an unusual sound behind and looking about beheld a revolver pointing at his face. Only two passengers were aboard, Thomas Ainsworth and a



RAYMOND HOLZSE
Bandit of northern Wisconsin, who planned several stage holdups



HERMAN RAFOTH
Driver of stage held up by Holzse, north of Shawano

Menominee indian. The driver at once brought his team to a stop and Holzse ordered the mail pouch thrown out. Rafoth asked Ainsworth what he should do and was advised to obey commands. After the mail had been surrendered the bandit bade the driver produce what money he had with him. Eleven dollars was passed over, the thief accusing the man of having more, which he denied. However, Rafoth did actually have forty-five dollars in his vest pocket and retained it by his equivocation. The bandit next turned to Ainsworth who was ordered to produce his money. The latter had nine dollars and seventy-five cents which Holzse threw upon the mail pouch lying on the ground. The indian was not molested. As the driver took up his reins to drive away, Ainsworth remarked to the highwayman that he was sorry he did not have an even ten dollars and told him to remember that he owed him a quarter. Holzse tartly commanded the man to close his mouth, to go down the road, and not to look back. After proceeding a short distance the occupants of the vehicle ventured to turn about and beheld the fellow ripping open the pouch with a knife. The loss was almost nothing as there were only two checks in the mail and these were worthless to the thief.

A number of episodes, some amusing, some of a serious nature, followed quickly. The driver, Rafoth, was taken by the sheriff to a neighboring town to identify a suspect and in his absence a youth was employed to drive the stage. On the return trip to Shawano a lumberjack suddenly appeared in the road and waved his pack as a signal for the conveyance to stop. Instead of bringing his horses to a halt the driver cracked his whip, and team and vehicle dashed by, leaving the expectant passenger standing in anything but a placid

...beheld the fellow ripping open the pouch

frame of mind. When later he accosted the driver demanding to know why he had not stopped, the boy declared he did not propose to be held up by a bandit. The suspect, taken by the officer, was not the highwayman who had stopped Rafoth.

Holzse might have given up his criminal practices but he was not of that kidney. Whether or not he ever had heard of Dick Turpin, it is a fact he had not far to go to emulate his fearless feats. He loved the limelight and his undoing was the consequence of his taking just one chance too many. Near Marquette, Michigan, he stopped a stage, warned all aboard there should be no shooting, but a passenger fired. At once Holzse sent ball after ball into the vehicle, killing one passenger, wounding another and twice piercing the hat of the driver. Following this he was captured and sentenced to the penitentiary for life, but later was paroled.

At one time stage lines crossed and re-crossed the state, linking hamlet and city in a network of communication. What has become of these hundreds of swaying, gilded vehicles? With the advent of the railroad they were either sent to remoter sections or became useless property. One of the last in Wisconsin, owned by W. T. Price at Black River falls, was permitted to fall to pieces in a barnyard.

Concerning some of these faithful old friends of our forefathers, the Concord coaches, W. W. Warner of Madison, in his youth a resident of Baraboo and its benefactor in death, wrote as follows:

"This was, I should say, about 1868-1869. Who among the boys who participated in that famous escapade, may ever forget? Be it known, there were fifteen or twenty antique, superanuated Concord stagecoaches which had been one after another placed, so to

speak, in dry dock and out of commission, having outlived their further transportational usefulness, and thus they were housed in a rambling series of sheds, just back of the present city hall. We young chaps, the day after a Fourth of July celebration, conceived the idea of decorating Oak street with the dilapidated vehicles. Some of the chariots, I remember, bore euphonious names – such as Argosy, Prairie Queen, and Western Monarch. Those who remember the one-time resplendent coaches, gorgeous beyond the dreams of a Ringling circus creation, will recall that they were integers connecting Baraboo with relatively near-by points of the outside world, such as Madison, Mazomanie, Portage, and Kilbourn. . .

"It was long after midnight when we scamps, as expeditiously and as quickly as possible, hauled forth a score of the nondescript vehicles from their moorings, to the Western Hotel street corner, and thence made an imposing string of them, reaching almost to the present post office site, and a fine spectacle they presented early next morning! Not many citizens of Baraboo were aware that such antediluvian chariots were in existence, much less that they were right here in Baraboo. The general astonishment, therefore, may well be imagined. What opportunities were lost in their destruction, shortly after this, their last appearance, for securing matchless museum antiques! But soon trouble – our trouble – began. Somehow the city officials and many of the older and more staid, law-abiding citizens, did not take kindly to such deviltry, and public resentment was quite general, while diligent efforts were at once put forth to apprehend the several juvenile malefactors involved in the disgraceful escapade."

Some of the principals in this adventure sought re-

mote wheat fields and remained away from Baraboo until the turbulent state of the public mind had subsided. Perturbed parents in other cases paid modest fines.

A century ago not even the most envisioned citizen could have dreamed that the old stagecoaches on the great highways of the country would be relegated to oblivion. Such a conception was as impossible as could be the projective abolition of railroad or automobile to the present generation. The old stage routes were the arteries of communication between city and city, village and village, hamlet and hamlet. It was the accepted mode of travel. Especially did the sages of that day consider the bumping coach with plodding team the extreme of comfort and speed, and that no greater advance of transportation would ever be reached. These elderly gentry visualized the time when the traveler urged his horse along an indian trail or blazed way, fording unbridged streams, plunging through swamps, and penetrating forests beset with savages. No wonder they stood in admiration before a stagecoach with four sturdy steeds attached, ready to carry them in shelter from the torrid sun or bedraggling rain.